

Punjabi Literature: Qisse of Laila-Majnu

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular Punjabi Qissa is that of Laila and Majnu. Laila and Majnu were two lovers, separated by fate who turned their destiny and would rather die together than live apart. Over the course of a millennia, the origin of the story of Laila and Majnu has been debated widely.

Some believe it to have been a collection of stories while some believe it is based on two people who existed in 7th century Arabia. However, in Punjab it is believed that the story of Laila and Majnu is different from the story of Layla and Majnun.

It is believed that the origin of the Punjabi legend was based on the fact that Laila had a similar name to Layla of Arabia and that Majnu who was from Punjab, was named after Qays' nickname Majnun. It is also believed that their site of death is located in Bijnor, Rajasthan as Laila-Majnu Mazar.

VERSIONS OF LAILA-MAJNU

Popularised by Lord Byron as the Romeo and Juliet of the East, Laila-Majnu is certainly the best known Punjabi Qissa. The origin of Laila Majnu is a disputed subject all throughout the Indian Subcontinent to the Middle East.

Some say that the story existed long before it was first written down in the 7th Century by Najdi Bedouin as Mullahwah-Layla in Arabic. It is believed to have been the real story of Qays ibn al-Mullawah and Layla bint Mahdi, later known as Layla al-Aamiriya.¹

Arabic Version

In the Arabic version of the poem, Qays ibn al-Mullawah fell in love with Layla al-Aamiriya. He quickly started writing poems about how much he loved her, frequently using her name. Several neighbours began referring to him as "Majnun" because of his obsessive attempt to pursue the girl. Her father declined when he requested her hand in marriage on the grounds that it would be scandalous for Layla to wed someone who was viewed as mentally unstable. Soon after, Layla was compelled to wed a second affluent and noble trader from the Thaqif tribe in Ta'if. Ward Althaqafi was regarded as an attractive man with a reddish complexion. Ward, which in Arabic means "rose," was his Arabic name.

¹ Bruijn, J. T. P. de; Yarshater, Ehsan (2009). General Introduction to Persian Literature: A History of Persian Literature. I. B. Tauris.

Majnun left the tribal camp after learning of her marriage and started wandering the adjacent desert. After a while, his family gave up on him coming home and left him food in the wilderness. On occasion, he was spotted writing in the sand with a stick or reciting poems to himself.

Often, Layla is portrayed as having relocated to a location in Northern Arabia with her husband, where she fell ill and ultimately passed away. In some adaptations, Layla passes away from grief about being unable to see her beloved. Later, in 688 AD, Majnun's body was discovered in the forest close to Layla's grave. The final three verses attributed to him were carved by him onto a rock next to the cemetery.

Persian Version

Some say it was first written as a poem in 584 AD by Nizami Ganjavi in Persian being called Layla-Majnun. "The story of Layla and Majnun was known in Persia as early as the 9th century. Two well known Persian poets, Rudaki and Baba Taher, both mention the lovers."²

In the Persian version of the legend, at school, Qays develops feelings for Leyli, but her father forbids any interaction. Majnun becomes fixated on Leyli after being separated from her and sings about his love for her in public. His nickname "Majnun" meaning enchanted or possessed comes from the fact that his devotion has grown to the point where he views and judges everything in terms of Leyli.

Majnun becomes disillusioned with civilization and roams nude in the desert among the creatures after realising that he cannot achieve unity despite others' efforts to intervene on his behalf. His love grows as he thinks about Leyli, making it impossible for him to eat or sleep. His only occupation is thinking of Leyli and penning love songs for her. Leyli, who is engaged against her will, protects her virginity by turning away all of her husband's advances. She sets up covert encounters with Majnun; during these encounters, they avoid eye contact and instead recite poetry aloud to one another.

Majnun is so preoccupied with having the perfect image of Leyli that when Leyli's spouse passes away, eliminating the legal barriers to a licit union, he flees to the desert. Leyli is buried in her wedding gown after passing away from grief. When Majnun learns of this, he hurries to her grave, where he promptly passes away of heartbreak. They are interred side by side, and people come to pray at their graves.

In the epilogue, someone has a dream in which they are married and cohabiting as a king and queen in paradise. In Nizami's version, the young lovers met at school and fell head over heels in love. Due to a family dispute, they were unable to meet, and Layla's family set up her marriage to another man.³ The Persian version of the story is much more dramatic in comparison to its Arabic counterpart.

² A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, "LEYLI O MAJNUN" in Encyclopedia Iranica.

³ The Story of Layla and Majnun, by Nizami. Translated Dr. Rudolf. Gelpke in collaboration with E. Mattin and G. Hill, Omega Publications, 1966.

Turkish Version

Turkish version of the story was known as Leyli-Majnun. The story flourished under the Ottoman Empire as it gained religious significance. In the Turkish version, Majnun went onto Hajj, where he gained a new perspective towards life and him losing the love of his life was a trial for him to get close to God. In this version, Majnun experienced enlightenment and love for God in the time where he was apart from Leyli, however, on finding out about her death he, in this version like the others, promptly succumbed to death.

Azerbaijani Version

Another well-known version of the story is the Azerbaijani version of Layla-Majnu. It was through here that the story of the two lovers travelled far and wide to European cities and societies. The version in Azerbaijani was written by by Fuzûlî and Hagiri Tabrizi in the 16th century, titled, Dâstân-ı Leylî vü Mecnûn.

Fuzûlî's rendition was borrowed by the legendary Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov, who used the material to produce what became the Middle East's first opera. Uzeyir Hajibeyov wrote the four-act opera Leyli and Majnun to a libretto in Azerbaijani that he and his brother Jeyhun Hajibeyov wrote. Baku hosted the opera's debut performance in 1908.⁴

The poem largely remains unmodified. It was initially presented on January 25, 1908, at Baku's Taghiyev Theatre, which was then a part of the Russian Empire, after being composed in 1907. It is thought to as the First Opera of the Muslim East. Huseyn Arablinski directed the opera's opening performance, and Hajibeyov played violin.

As a result, the opera Leyli and Majnun is credited to having birthed a brand-new musical genre that combines European and Oriental musical styles to create an amalgam that resembles an intercultural dialogue between East and West.⁵ This opera has been shown more than 2,000 times at the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater as well as in other countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Turkey, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.⁶

Punjabi Version

Perhaps the best known to us, however, is the Punjabi version of the story. The skeleton of the story remains the same, however, there are significant changes in certain areas.

Majnun, a little boy, had displayed love in his character since he was a youngster, exposing the sorrow of his existence to the seers' eyes. Majnun grew to like Laila while they were both students. Over time, the flame evolved into a spark, and Majnun found it difficult to relax if Laila arrived at school a little late. He held his book in his

⁴ The Permanent Delegation of Azerbaijan to UNESCO requested that UNESCO should be associated with the 100th anniversary of the first opera in the East: "*Leyli and Majnun*", in 2008" UNESCO.

⁵ "*Leyli and Majnun – 90th Jubilee*" by Ramazan Khalilov, *Azerbaijan International* ([northern] Winter 1997)

⁶ "*Leyli And Majnun (opera)*"

hand and focused on the entrance, which pleased the cynics and agitated everyone in the area. Laila's heart was ignited by Majnun's love as the spark eventually grew into a wildfire. Both parties exchanged glances. Majnun was the only person she saw in the class, and the only one he saw was Laila. Majnun would read the name of Laila while reading from a book, and Laila would write Majnun's name across her schedule when writing from dictation. Everyone in the school pointed them out in whispers to one another. The children's teachers were concerned and wrote to the parents of both children to let them know that they were insane and terribly in love with one another and that it seemed impossible to get their attention away from their relationship, which had stymied any chance of academic advancement. Majnun was the only thing on her mind. Majnun caused havoc at school while she was away because of his deep sorrow and anguish, forcing his parents to take him home because there didn't appear to be anything left for him there. Majnun's parents consulted doctors, soothsayers, healers, and magicians, paying them lavish sums of money in exchange for a cure that would prevent Majnun from thinking about Laila.

Laila's parents immediately took her away and kept a close eye on her. In this manner, they removed her from Majnun's life.

Even the great physician, Lukman (Hakim Luqman) had no cure for the lovesick. "Nobody can heal a patient of love" he said, all his friends, family members, well-wishers, and wise advisors tried their hardest to get the memory of Laila out of his head, but to no avail.

The parents of Majnun made the decision to turn to the Kaba for protection as a final resort after exhausting all other options. Even there, all he could pray for was his dear love, Laila. Laila had been distraught away from Majnu. She didn't eat, sleep or even get out of her room.

On his return, an attempt by Majnun's family fell successful and as per Punjabi traditions, the boy's family visited the home of Laila. Majnun had been instructed by his family to do everything in his power to seem completely sane as the teachers had termed the couple insane due to their love for each other. They went, according to the custom of the East, in procession to the house of the bride, where a special seat was made for the bridegroom, who was covered with garlands of flowers. The dog that would accompany Laila to school turned up to the ceremony at the house. Majnun could not contain his emotions and ran towards the dog and hugged him with love. However, Laila's family would not have it, they termed his emotions as insanity and did not allow Laila and Majnu to marry.

Distraught and in anguish, Majnu looked far and wide to search for Laila when he happened upon a letter-carrier on a camel who had known where Laila was. He told Majnun that her family had left the country and moved a 100 miles north. Majnu kept going back and forth to tell the letter-carrier to tell Laila his confessions of love, but after the third time he went, the letter carrier told him that Laila's home was in the vicinity and that Majnu should stay in a nearby ruined mosque so he could see his Laila again.

Finding this out, Laila's family moved onto other areas where there were deserts believed to have been Rajasthan. Majnu would follow them wherever they took Laila. He went on without food or water to sustain him and would

even eat rocks to survive just to see his beloved Laila again. One day on a walk, Laila was able to sneak away and meet Majnu in the desert. Majnu, who could not even stand anymore saw Laila and begged her to stay. She told him that it was for his safety that she had to leave as she did not want her father to slaughter him. Majnu held Laila and she left. He rolled down a sand dune where his head struck a tree. He remained alive in the hope that she would fulfill her promise of coming back. Months passed, and she came back. Majnu had remained there, stuck to a tree. He seemed to have become one with it, if someone struck the tree, he'd shout "Oh Laila!". When she came back, she felt bittersweet. He told her that his heart was satisfied now and that he could die. He died as she held him in her arms and then herself died of heartbreak that same instant.

HISTORY & PUNJABIYAT

Though significantly different from other versions of the story, it is debated that the story of Qays and Layla may have taken place in Arabia, the Punjabi version may have been real with another girl named Laila who lived in Lahore or Peshawar. It may have also been an amalgamation of many other real lovers from Punjab who had been separated by their families and doomed to stay away from each other.

For the Punjabi society, it is a tryst between lovers to see each other again. It highlights that heartbreak can even cause death and that there is honour in love. The story of Laila-Majnu among Punjabi people is synonymous with undying love and devotion of being in love.

Famous lines have been taken and used by Punjabi people. Over the years, the two most famous phrases used have become "To see the beauty of Laila, you need the eyes of Majnu" and "Nobody can cure love".

In the Punjabi qisse, a recurring theme has been to keep lovers apart. In some instances, it is a degree of care for the children of the parents keeping lovers apart. More commonly, it is a form of honour – to keep them away is a way of highlighting their own protective nature.

In the case of Laila and Majnu, it was a thing of honour to keep Laila and Majnu apart as everyone called Majnu insane. For Majnu, she was the only thing he loved, more than even himself. He was the pinnacle of loyalty where no matter where he went or what he did, all he could think about was Laila. Laila was his life-force that kept him alive only so he could see her again.

ADAPTATIONS & CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

For more than a millennia, the story of Laila Majnu has been adapted in prose and poems. In the 12th century AD, "Layla-Majnun" was a poem written by Nizami Ganjavi as a formal poem. By the same name, 15th century poets, Jami, Ali-Shir Nava'I, Fuzûlî and Hagiri Tabrizi also adapted the poem in different languages.

The first movie made on the same was an Indian Hindi silent film with Patience Cooper, named Laila-Majnu. In 1927, an Indian Hindi silent film produced by Excelsior Pictures and directed by Manilal Joshi of the same name was made. In 1931, 2 movies named Laila-Majnu were released Krishnatone and directed by K. Rathod and

another one produced by Madan Theatres and directed by J. J. Madan. *Leila Majnun*, a film was that was directed by B. S. Rajhans released in 1933. Persian film, *Leyli va Majnun*, was released in 1937 and was translated to English as Layla and Majnun. The story spread far and wide to the southern part of the Indian sub-continent were movies were released such as the *Laila Majnu* (1949 film), an Indian Telugu film, *Laila Majnu* (1950 film), an Indian Tamil-language film and *Laila Majnu*(1962), an Indian Malayali-language film. A highly sought after film by the name *Laila Majnu* was released in 1953 starring Shammi Kapoor in Hindi. Another Persian film, *Leyli va Majnun*, was released in 1956 and was translated to English as Layla and Majnun starring Mahvash. Indian cinema produced two more movies, by the name of *Laila Majnu*, in 1976, starring Rishi Kapoor and another in 2018, produced by Imtiyaz Ali. In pre-independence India, the first Pashto-language film was an adaptation of this story.

Leyla and Majnun are frequently mentioned by Orhan Pamuk in his books *My Name is Red* and *The Museum of Innocence*. The epic is depicted on a panel of the Alisher Navoi metro station in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and the Nizami metro station in Baku, Azerbaijan. Rasheed frequently calls Laila and Tariq Layla and Majnun in the Afghan author Khaled Hosseini's book *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Leyla and Majnun are mentioned in South African author Achmat Dangor's books "Waiting for Leila" and "Kafka's Curse," who is of mixed African and Indian ancestry. Laila refers to this poetry in Roshani Chokshi's *The Golden Wolves* by calling Séverin "Majnun," which means madman. The story was transformed into the Arabic play "Majnun Layla" in 1932 by the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi, popularly known as the Prince of Poets.

CONCLUSION

The story of Laila (Layla) and Majnu (Majnun) still lives in the hearts of people from the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East. It is a story of love and devotion which still inspires the souls of its readers.

The Qissa of Laila and Majnu has made a special place for itself particularly in Punjabi hearts wherein even today one frequently hears phrases of the love of Laila and Majnu in streets and homes. References are made in songs and books and even movies and plays are dedicated to them. Laila and Majnu may have been real or may have been a collection of stories, their love lives on in the hearts of all those who have read and heard this story.